CIA offered crime boss $150,000

According to files, Chicago's Sam Giancana was hired in the '60s plot. He said he would do the job for free.

By Laura Myers
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WASHINGTON — The CIA offered $150,000 to assassinate Fidel Castro in the early 1960s, but the mob insisted on taking the job for free, according to a newly declassified document.

"We were at [ideological] war," said Robert Maheu, who as a Las Vegas private investigator on the CIA payroll in 1960 hired Chicago crime boss Sam Giancana for the hit. "Would it be folly to go after Saddam Hussein during the gulf war or to go after Hitler during World War II?"

The underworld murder-for-hire contract was detailed in a summary of a May 1962 CIA briefing for then-Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. By then, the Kennedy White House had launched its unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, and several assassination attempts against Castro had failed.

The memo is among 450 documents, nearly all newly declassified, included in a soon-to-be released State Department volume, "Cuba, 1961-62." Only two copies of the three-page memo were made, one each for the attorney general and CIA headquarters.

In the memo, Sheffield Edwards, then director of security for the CIA, wrote that senior agency offi-

to assassinate Castro, memo shows

cials approved plots to kill Castro between August 1960 and May 1961. The White House is not mentioned. "Knowledge of this project . . . . was kept to a total of six persons," Edwards wrote.

At least two assassination attempts were made with CIA-supplied lethal pills and organized-crime muscle in early 1961, according to the memo and congressional hearings in 1975. Lawmakers counted a total of eight CIA tries to kill Castro in the early 1960s; Castro bragged that it was two dozen.

The memo said investigator Maheu contacted John Rosselli, a top Giancana lieutenant, to arrange the hits on Castro.

"A figure of $150,000 was set by the agency as a payment to be made on completion of the operation," the memo said. Rosselli and Giancana "emphatically stated that they wished no part of any payment," it added. Still, $11,000 in expenses was paid.

Rosselli and Giancana, both later victims of mob hits, were not told that the U.S. government had put out the contract on Castro, but they "guessed or assumed that CIA was behind the project," the memo concludes.

After the Bay of Pigs invasion failed to oust Castro in April 1961, President John F. Kennedy and his brother, the attorney general, tacitly approved a renewed CIA effort to kill the Cuban leader.

"They were telling the CIA, 'Do whatever it takes to get rid of Castro,'" said Peter Kornbluh, senior analyst at the National Security Archives, a private research organization.